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GOLDEN RETRIEVER
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Training Tip

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Stressed? Shy? There's a Solution!

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Does your dog shy away from strangers, cringe at noises, flinch when your hand appears to pet, run away when the leash comes out, tremble, hide in corners to be invisible? These are tell-tale signs of shy or fearful dogs. I've seen all these and more in the years I've been working for DVGRR. If you have a shy or fearful dog, learning to recognize your dog's body language and stress signals is crucial to help him overcome his fears. If there's one thing I've learned, it's never give up. There is ALWAYS HOPE!

It only takes patience and a bit of compassion. Since Project Home Life began, I've had the privilege to work with really dedicated volunteers who work to rehabilitate shy and fearful dogs, learn the stress signals, and how to create a calm, relaxing environment. These volunteers are not professional dog trainers.

So what causes fear in dogs? There are a number of causes including genetics (poor quality breeding), lack of socialization (typical of backyard breeders and puppy mills), abuse, traumatic experiences, pain or illness, and associative fears (trying to manage one fear leads to another). The signals dogs exhibit when stressed or fearful vary. Individually, some of these signals may not be a stress reaction. Look at the overall situation when determining if these behaviors are stress indicators:

- Excessive panting
- Repetitive pacing
- Tail tucked
- Yawning
- Lip licking
- Shutting down (freezing in place)
- Trembling
- Won't eat
- Cowering
- Tensed muscles
- Continuous barking
- Extreme salivation or decreased salivation
- Vomiting
- Loss of bladder control or bowels

You probably act out when stressed, and your dog is no different. Reducing stress is the key to the solution, and there are many ways to do that.

Exercise – You know how great it feels to get out and do something fun. Your dog feels good when he has fun too! Exercise is great for reducing stress, and it helps get rid of that built-up energy. Exercising your dog shouldn't be a chore. Make it fun by teaching your dog cool tricks or creating an obstacle course in your backyard. Obviously simple activities like walks and chasing tennis balls are great exercises, too!

Mental Stimulation – I love to see dogs work for their food. There are many “hide the treat” games, whether it's a ball he has to roll so the treats pop out or a board on which he has to push buttons and levers to uncover hidden treats. You can make your own treat game: Get three plastic cups, hide a treat under one, swirl the cups and have your dog figure out which cup hides the treat.

Nutrition – Feeding your dog a quality food is essential for optimum health. Many people think a high protein diet can help reduce stress.

Routine – Maintain a daily routine, so your dog knows what to expect. Have you ever had your dog walk the same ten blocks every day, and one day he pancakes to the ground and won't walk past the fourth block any longer? This is probably from encountering something frightening, and could be as simple as a trash can or a loud truck. Be attuned to these stimuli and remember that consistency is the key to reducing stress.

Comfort – Minimize your dog's exposure to things that frighten him and meet your dog's concern with a cool, confident demeanor. Reward your dog for calm, relaxed behavior. Create a calm environment for your dog with the following:

Music – “Through a Dog's Ear” is a music series specifically designed to help slow heart rate and create a soothing response.

Thundershirt™ – A snugly wrapped t-shirt, fastened with Velcro. Some people swear by these while others have tried them and saw no difference in behavior. As with all techniques, you have to try many to find the right one for your dog.

Massage or T-Touch – We humans find massage relaxing and stress relieving, so why wouldn't our dogs? The T-Touch (or Tellington Touch) is a technique using circular hand motions while touching the dog's skin, and many people have had a lot of success with this.

Create a Safe Spot – Most shy or fearful dogs have a “safe spot” to which they retreat during a stressful or scary situation. Add a blanket, dog bed, and his favorite toy to that spot. Respect his safe spot and do not disturb him there. However, if your dog spends ALL his time there, it's important to help him venture out gradually, so he doesn't become reluctant to interact.

Security Mat / Blanket – If car travel, vet visits, or trips to other locations are stressful, take a mat, blanket, or his favorite toy along with him.

Natural/Alternative Medicines and Holistic Remedies – Like other techniques, some people have a lot of luck with these while others don't. There are many available including D.A.P. (Dog Appeasing Pheromone), Acupuncture, flower essence (such as Bach's Rescue Remedy®), Chinese herbs (look for the Herbsmith, Inc.™), and aromatherapy using lavender. Simply spray lavender-scented mist onto a bandanna and tie it around your dog's neck. You can also spray it on his blanket or dog bed.

What about You?

Your own body language is critical when interacting with your shy dog.

First, let the dog come to you and have your guests ignore your dog until he feels comfortable enough to approach. Let your dog choose or choose not to interact.

Turn to the side. Some dogs are intimidated by a face-to-face approach. Crouch or sit sideways to appear less threatening.

Don't stare. Eye contact can be perceived as a threat. Simple eye contact will work, but don't watch or star for more than a few seconds.

Don't hover or lean over your dog. When you want to pet, get on your dog's level and allow him to approach. Start by petting under his chin, not on top of his head.

Keep a positive attitude. You'll face challenges, but as you overcome your dog's fears with baby steps, you and your dog will both be rewarded.